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ABSTRACT

At a literacy conference in December 1998, British Prime Minister Tony Blair defined phonics as "the skilled process of teaching children how the 44 sounds in the English language are represented by a letter or group of letters." But 4 years down the track, several recent reports from both national and international bodies continue to draw attention to the fact that many primary school teachers in England are not confident in teaching the 44 phonemes ("sounds") of spoken English and the graphemes ("letter or group of letters") of written English. This paper discusses the "Periodic Table of Phonics" (the THRASS Graphemechart), which was written and designed by the author in consultation with the Australian educator Denyse Ritchie. The paper notes that thousands of written evaluations from hundreds of courses worldwide can be viewed by visiting the TRAINING section in any of the main THRASS websites. It comments on many other papers and discussions about teaching phonics and reading. The paper gives 10 reasons why all teachers of English should be trained to use the THRASS resources, especially the "THRASS Periodic Table of Phonics." It challenges the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) to prove that their materials can be used to teach 25 five-year-olds to read, stating that the author will do the same using the THRASS materials and resources. The paper contends that the NLS has failed to provide primary teachers in England with the knowledge and skills to teach phonics with confidence and efficiency. (Contains 19 references.) (NKA)

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Why All Teachers of English Should Be Trained to Use the THRASS 'Periodic Table of Phonics'

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WHY ALL TEACHERS OF ENGLISH SHOULD BE TRAINED TO USE THE THRASS 'PERIODIC TABLE OF PHONICS'

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> To help learners develop appropriate phonic (letter-sound) knowledge, you, the teacher, must have accurate, explicit knowledge of these relationships. Too frequently learners are given misleading information which clearly does not assist their learning and often creates confusion. For example, teachers sometimes teach that the letter 'a' is pronounced /a/ (as in 'cat'); but the letter 'a' can represent a number of different sounds...
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> Emmitt, M & Pollock J (2002)
> Language and Learning: An Introduction for Teaching, OUP, Australia

At the OFSTED Literacy Conference, 7 December 1998, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, defined phonics as "the skilled process of teaching children how the 44 sounds in the English Language are represented by a letter or group of letters". Yet, here we are, four years down the track and several recent reports, from both national and international bodies (e.g. the HMI Report Ref. No. 329, 'Teaching Phonics', November 2001, and the "Fullan Report", 'Watching Learning 3', Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada, January 2003, respectively), continue to draw attention to the fact that many primary school teachers in England are not confident in teaching the 44 phonemes ('sounds') of spoken English and the graphemes ('letter or group of letters') of written English.

In March 1999 I was invited by OFSTED to produce a paper for circulation and subsequent discussion. The seminar related to 'The Importance of Phonics in Learning to Read and Write'. My paper was entitled 'A National Strategy to Train Teachers to Accurately Articulate the 44 Phonemes of Spoken English and to Accurately Identify the Graphemes of Written English' and I stated that, based on evidence from inspection and my own conclusions from work with thousands of teachers over many years, "Many of our teachers are not able to accurately articulate the 44 phonemes and to accurately identify their graphemes in written words. As a consequence, phonemic awareness and graphemic awareness are not taught efficiently and well in many of our schools so, if this seminar endorses the importance of phonics in learning to read and write, it must follow that urgent action is needed to dramatically improve the quality of phonics teaching in our schools". I stated that, at the end of the training, teachers should be able to:

- Accurately articulate, identify, read and spell the 24 consonant phonemes.
- Accurately articulate, identify, read and spell the 7 short monophthongs.
- Accurately articulate, identify, read and spell the 5 long monophthongs.
- Accurately articulate, identify, read and spell the 8 diphthongs.
- Blend phonemes for reading (beyond 'initial letter sounds').
- Segment words into phonemes for spelling (beyond 'initial letter sounds').

In relation to this recommendation, in an article entitled 'The Phoneme Test: Should All Teachers Pass It?' (published in Dyslexia Review, The Journal of the Dyslexia Institute Guild, Vol. 11, No.4 p9-12, July 2000) I wrote, "It is stated in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) document 'Phonics with CD ROM' (DfEE, 2000) that the phonic work in the NLS Framework is built around the idea that, 'Children should learn to identify the phonemes in their spoken language and learn how each of these phonemes is commonly spelt'. Therefore, if the Standards and Effectiveness Unit, Department for Education and Employment, aim to raise standards in literacy teaching, should all teachers not be tested on their ability to articulate the English phonemes accurately and on their ability to list common spelling choices for each of the phonemes?". I ended the article with the conclusion, "Once teachers have passed The Phoneme Test, children learning the non-transparent orthography of English will be receiving tuition from someone that can both accurately articulate the 44 English phonemes and list their common spelling choices" (the article is downloadable from the LIBRARY section of www.thrass.com or hard copies are available from THRASS UK, Units 1-3 Tarvin Sands, Chester, Cheshire. CH3 8JF. England).

It is still my belief, from work with many more thousands of teachers from England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, other countries in Europe, Singapore and Australia, that there are many teachers in England who are not able to 'accurately articulate, identify, read and spell' the 24 consonant phonemes and the 20 vowel phonemes of spoken English. As a consequence, they are not skilled at, to use the Prime Minister's words, "teaching children

how the 44 sounds in the English Language are represented by a letter or group of letters". Only months after the OFSTED seminar in 1999, I received a letter from the Head of Primary and Nursery Division, OFSTED, in which, he stated, "Your request to address an audience of inspectors and NLS directors is not one that I can do anything about Alan. The Regional Directors are under John Stannard's control, as you know, and the training of inspectors is now the responsibility of individual contractors. You are, indeed, a valuable resource to be harnessed, along with a number of other experts in the literacy field, but your expertise and theirs is best delivered, in my opinion, through the channels of training associated with the relevant published materials." I still do not share the view, especially given the conclusions in recent national and international reports, that the expertise, in this particular case, is best delivered through channels independent of the Government.

It is my view that, in 1991, I produced the first drafts of what was to become the 'Periodic Table of Phonics' (the THRASS Graphemechart) and the teaching guide, that I have written and designed in consultation with Australian Denyse Ritchie, 'Teaching THRASS Whole-Picture Keyword Phonics: The Essential Guide to Progression and Assessment for All Teachers of English' [Davies A & Ritchie D (2003) ISBN I 876424 50 8], will be recognised as a significant landmark in the teaching of English worldwide. Delusions of grandeur or, perhaps, a modern-day 'Mendeleyev' (the creator of the Periodic Table in Chemistry) overlooked and ignored by his own government? There is already widespread regard for the THRASS audio, magnetic, printed, software and video resources and the associated accredited training courses. Indeed, thousands of written evaluations, from hundreds of courses, worldwide, can be viewed by visiting the TRAINING section in any of the main THRASS websites (e.g. www.thrass.com). Many of these evaluations state that the THRASS "New Phonics" program should be taught to all teachers and trainees concerned with the teaching of English. Given the stated purpose of this seminar, I reproduce, below, two course evaluations written by NLS Managers from two different LEAs:

> The course has greatly increased my knowledge and understanding of phonics and the teaching of it. I feel more confident now. Course delivered with great enthusiasm and thorough knowledge of the subject. It was useful to see the approach used with classes of children together with many references to classroom behaviours and individual children's needs. This multisensory approach will add to our LEA's recommendations for teaching within the Word Level element of the Literacy Hour.
>
> This course has really updated my knowledge and refreshed my understanding of THRASS - and how beneficial this is to teacher subject knowledge and to LEAs trying to meet the 2002 and 2004 targets! Presentation was excellent, challenging, engaging and realistic.

I have read the main paper distributed for discussion, which largely relates to the 'synthetic phonics versus analytic phonics' debate. This debate was dealt with by John Stannard in 1999, when as the then Director of the National Literacy Strategy, he wrote, "What matters is that children are systematically taught the phonic code and that they learn to apply this along with other strategies to develop fluent and accurate reading and spelling" (The Phonics War is Phoney, TES Letters, 5 March, 1999). In support of this conclusion, Davies & Ritchie (2003, p11) state:

> Some teachers ask if Word Level Teaching should be 'synthetic phonics' or 'analytic phonics'? Synthetic phonics usually involves part-to-whole learning, that is, children being taught 'letter sounds' (in a 'word-free' stage) so that they can blend (synthesise) the 'letter sounds' (the parts) to create words (the wholes). Analytic phonics usually involves whole-to-part learning, that is, children analyse lists of words (the wholes), usually learnt by sight in a 'phonics-free' stage, to determine the parts (starting, usually, with the 'letter sound' at the beginning of the words). We believe that children should be taught to use both processes, starting first with guided part-to-whole learning (Keyword Synthesis is taught at Stage 7) and progressing to interactive whole-to-part learning (Keyword Analysis is Stage 9). However, we do not believe that this learning should be through using the artificial and restrictive 'letter sounds' of "Old Phonics" (also known as the One-Letter-Makes-One-Sound-Method or the acronym OLMOSM) because teachers using 'Artificial Synthetic Phonics' are only able to help their learners decode a very small percentage of the five-hundred basewords of English, many of which occur frequently in even the most basic of books.

I hope that the comment in the distributed paper "indeed not simply phonics first but phonics only first" is not a serious suggestion for national strategy. In the words of Sue Palmer (Straight talking on toddler speech, TES Letters, 14 February 2003), "But unless we acknowledge how things have changed, and start helping parents provide a more language-rich environment for little children, universal literacy will remain beyond our grasp". In keeping with this, Davies & Ritchie (2003, p11) state, "and it is assumed, by most teachers, that teaching at one level is supported by appropriate teaching at another e.g. in the same day, or even the same lesson, young children may be exposed to work on phonics and yet, later, be turning over the pages of a book, with the help of an older child or adult, to 'pretend-read' a favourite story (apprenticeship reading)".

The Fullan Report recommends that the next phase of the NLS should involve, "deepening and broadening teacher subject knowledge and pedagogical understanding" (p141) and the HMI report states that, "However, there is still scope for improvement in the way that phonics is taught and in the speed with which it is taught". It is my belief that there is now sufficient evidence, from the thousands of written evaluations on the internet, by teachers, assistants, educational psychologists and speech pathologists working in pre-schools, schools,

colleges and universities, written comments in OFSTED school reports and 'early-days' research by a Welsh LEA, that showed "considerable impact" on reading for all Y3 to Y6 year groups (Matthews, 1998), for the British Government to fully investigate the use of the THRASS resources in all Key Stages (including the Foundation Stage, where THRASS Stage T1, Picture Location, establishes essential speaking and listening skills as the first main ingredient of good phonics teaching).

Given the widespread regard for THRASS, I believe that educational researchers, especially those in government and university education departments, should seek to compare the relative contribution of THRASS Whole-Picture Keyword Phonics, that is "New Phonics", with the 'letter sound' approach of "Old Phonics" programs - in terms of, firstly, the improvement in teacher subject knowledge, secondly, pupil/student progress and, thirdly, the efficient acquisition of life-long word solving skills (Phonographic Metacognition).

Why should all teachers of English be trained to use the THRASS resources, especially the THRASS 'Periodic Table of Phonics'? Davies & Ritchie (2003) list the main distinguishing features of the THRASS program:

- Essential speaking and listening skills are taught, from the outset, using integral pictures and keywords on 'whole-picture' charts - not a separate resource or another program.
- The units of the program are the 44 phonemes (speech sounds) and the 120 keygraphemes (spelling choices) of English - not the artificial and restrictive 'letter sounds' of "Old Phonics" programs.
- From the outset, both lower-case and capital letters are always identified by name - as is expected of good readers and spellers, whether they be children or adults.
- From the outset, teachers are able to make natural links between the 44 phonemes and their graphemes by drawing attention to words commonly found in the environment, such as the names of people, places and products.
- The program does not depend on learners having to ignore the misleading advice that, when reading, each lower-case letter has a specific sound and, when spelling, each sound has a specific lower-case letter - along with having to ignore any associated physical actions, alliterative characters (such as "Alan Ant" or "Denyse Duck") and/or explanations (such as letters being 'silent', 'magic', 'soft', 'tricky' or 'irregular'). That is, there is no need for any 'Changeover Teaching', to help learners change from artificial 'letter sounds' to natural phonemes (from Artificial Synthesis to Natural Synthesis), or the unlearning of inappropriate behaviours or thinking.
- Speaking and listening skills, sequential skills, word synthesis skills (part-to-whole skills) and word analysis skills (whole-to-part skills) are taught by continual reference to pictures, letters, keywords, phoneme-boxes and/or keygraphemes displayed on class and/or individual 'whole-picture' charts.
- All of the sub-stage and stage outcomes are assessed by criterion-referenced tests (tests with observable standards of achievement).
- The program is cross-curricular - phonographic comparisons are made, from the outset, between words from different subject areas.
- The program teaches life-long word solving skills (Phonographic Metacognition).
- The program can be taught to learners of all ages and abilities.

The present worldwide position, with regards to teacher subject knowledge for phonics, is best summed up by the American professor Linnea Ehri (2002),

> The key to successful reading instruction lies primarily in the hands of teachers, and there is cause for concern. Various studies have indicated that teachers are not well prepared to teach reading. Many have not been taught about the processes I have discussed, and they lack sufficient knowledge about the alphabetic system and phonemic awareness to teach it to their students.

It is worth noting that, since my proposal to OFSTED in 1999, Australian schoolteachers have attended approximately 200 days of THRASS training each year and this year, 2003, given the interest in the new guide, it is anticipated that Australian schoolteachers will attend over 300 days of training - training based on work originally conceived in Chester, England - and training that has, to my knowledge, never been investigated by any senior officer of the NLS. Though, to be fair, some THRASS terminology has been adopted - "We are happy to acknowledge the use of the term 'split digraph' by you in the THRASS programme, which predated by some considerable time, the publication of Progression in Phonics" (John Stannard, Director of the National Literacy Strategy, 8 June 2000).

The Fullan Report concludes that "We believe that much can be learned from this educational reform". It is my belief that many researchers and politicians in future years will conclude that one of the biggest lessons to be learned from heavily funded national initiatives is that there is considerable opportunity for large sums of money to be spent on 'misguided' resources and courses (in this case, the British Government's support for the artificial letter-sounds of "Old Phonics" rather than the natural phonemes and graphemes of "New Phonics").

The Australians Emmitt and Pollock (2002) argue that, as stated above, "Too frequently learners are given misleading information which clearly does not assist their learning and often creates confusion. For example, teachers sometimes teach that the letter 'a' is pronounced /a/ (as in 'cat'); but the letter 'a' can represent a number of different sounds". It is my belief that the NLS resources and courses are based on misleading information. Indeed, even the main paper distributed for discussion contains the statement, "A snake is a useful

mnemonic for 's' as the letter looks like a snake and the phoneme hisses like a snake." The letter does not hiss like a snake in such names as Sharon, Sheila, Shelley, Rashid, Joshua, Sian, Sean, Sinead and James, Lucy, Frances and Grace (city, centre, circle and circus) do not have 'a snake' and the basic words as, has, is, his, was, she, shop, fish, PUSH, sure, shout, shirt, shark, should, nose, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, have nothing what-so-ever to do with the sound of a snake! Though this misguided thinking is in keeping with the NLS directive that all children should be taught to chant the 'Vowel Rap', that is, "a-e-i-o-u, That is how we say them, a-e-i-o-u, That is how we play them. We say them soft, We say them loud, Of our vowels, We sure are proud". As is stated by Davies & Ritchie (2003, p9) "What is the purpose of teaching this rap to the thousands of five-year-olds that are 'not making adequate progress' (Early Literacy Support, ELS) and the thousands of nine-year-olds that have 'fallen behind in literacy' (Additional Literacy Support, ALS) when there are twenty, not five, vowel sounds in spoken English? Indeed, in the 'Early Phonics for Secondary Pupils' handbook (Ref: DfES 0325/2002), for teachers of pupils with special education needs in Key Stage 3, the misleading advice, repeated in several places, even extends to advising that the graphemic representation for the vowel phoneme in 'heard' is the 'ea' (not the vowel trigraph 'ear'), in 'door' it is the 'oo' (not the vowel trigraph 'oor') and in 'law' it is the 'a' (not the vowel digraph 'aw'). This advice ignores the fact that 'consonant' letters may be included in vowel graphemes. The advice that the vowel phoneme in the words 'torn', 'door' and warn' is different to that heard in the words 'haul', 'law' and 'call', warranting a change in symbol from /or/ to /au/ is, to be frank, ridiculous. But no more so than the DfEE advice in Circular 4/98, Annex C, p41, that trainees must be taught to recognise common errors in English, such as "spellings which omit the weaker elements of consonant blends e.g. omitting 'h' from 'thing'." The 't' 'h' is a consonant digraph for the phoneme heard at the start of "thumb". There is no 'weak' element to be omitted.

The most popular ten names for girls and boys born in Britain in 2002, were Chloe, Emily, Jessica, Ellie, Sophie, Megan, Charlotte, Lucy, Hannah, Olivia (for the girls) and Jack, Joshua, Thomas, James, Daniel, Benjamin, William, Samuel, Joseph, Oliver (for the boys). The NLS states that five-year-olds (Reception Year) should be taught to "read and write own name and explore other words related to the spelling of own name". I challenge any NLS officer, any NLS literacy consultant or any NLS trained teacher, to use the materials and guidance produced by the NLS or, if preferred, the materials and guidance in any of the other phonics programs promoted by the NLS or OFSTED, to show me, in a videoed live demonstration, how this objective can be achieved with a class of twenty five-year-olds with the names listed above. I will, likewise, do the same but using the materials and guidance produced by THRASS. Interested parties can then judge which lesson was the most efficacious and which resources, in their opinion, are more likely to secure the efficient acquisition of life-long word solving skills (Phonographic Metacognition).

In the preliminary report of the Literacy Task Force, 'A Reading Revolution: How We Can Teach Every Child to Read Well' (February 1997), it stated that, "We now know a great deal about the best technologies for the teaching of reading and that they include a recognition of the critical importance of phonics in the early years. The chief strategic task is to ensure that primary teachers and schools are well-informed about best practice and have the skills to act upon it." It is my belief that the THRASS resources and courses are best practice, for all ages and stages, and it is my intention to work with representatives from both national and international institutions to fully assess the impact of the THRASS "New Phonics" initiative for the teaching of phonographic languages, especially English. One thing is for sure, with regards to the teaching of English, I agree with the conclusion, from the OFSTED invitation seminar in March 1999 (paragraph 15 in the 'Summary of Points Arising From Group Discussions'): "Until teachers have the ability to segment words themselves and identify the number of phonemes they contain, they are hardly likely to be able to teach these skills well to their pupils".

The British Prime Minister was right to define phonics as "the skilled process of teaching children how the 44 sounds in the English Language are represented by a letter or group of letters". However, the NLS has, four years down the track, failed to provide primary teachers in England with the knowledge and skills to teach phonics with confidence and efficiency. It is my opinion, and that of many other teachers in England (as is evident from the 'UK Evaluations' on the main THRASS internet sites), that the innovative THRASS resources should be fully investigated by the British Government. Alas, I fear, it will be institutions from other governments that will prove the case for THRASS. The irony is that, in the very near future, six-year-old children, in schools worldwide, that successfully pass THRASS stages 'T6. Phoneme Location', 'T7. Keyword Synthesis, 'T8. Keygrapheme Recall' and 'T9. Keyword Analysis', will have a better understanding of the natural phonemes and graphemes of English than many of the teachers in England.

On 8 January 2003, George W. Bush, President of the United States of America, stated:

> Reid [Lyon] is a reading expert. He understands the science of reading. He explained to me a long time ago, some curricula work and some don't. He understands what works.

It will be interesting to see what action is taken by Reid Lyon and other Government and State reading experts, from America, Australia and elsewhere, once they have seen "TEACHING THRASS" (Davies & Ritchie, 2003). I am optimistic that, mindful of the fact that very large numbers of primary and secondary children in England are unable to read words because they give each letter a specific sound (what Davies & Ritchie refer to as 'Phoneme Deprived') and are unable to spell words because they use a limited range of spelling choices (what Davies & Ritchie refer to as 'Grapheme Deprived'), they will not be as dismissive of the THRASS "New Phonics" resources and courses as the reading experts employed by the British Government.

The full list of references for this paper can be downloaded from www.thrass.com/dfes0303.htm

FULL LIST OF REFERENCES

The main purpose of this 'Invitation Seminar' paper was to raise issues related to the teaching of phonics in the National Literacy Strategy in England - and to present these issues in a suitable format for both academics and teachers (including trainee teachers). In keeping with the above, most of the references have been embedded in the text and the paper has been limited to only four pages of A4. The full list of references are given below:

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